

Strengthening the Impact of Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program



Nourishing Lives, Strengthening Communities

Celebrating Alabama's Progress

Certified Public Manager® Program

CPM Solutions Alabama 2024



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The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from the above diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager® Training Program.

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Glossary of Acronyms

AAA – Area Agency on Aging

ACL – Administration for Community Living

ADSS – Alabama Department of Senior Services

ADRC – Aging and Disability Resource Centers

AoA – Administration on Aging

HHS – United States Department of Health and Human Services

ENP – Elderly Nutrition Program

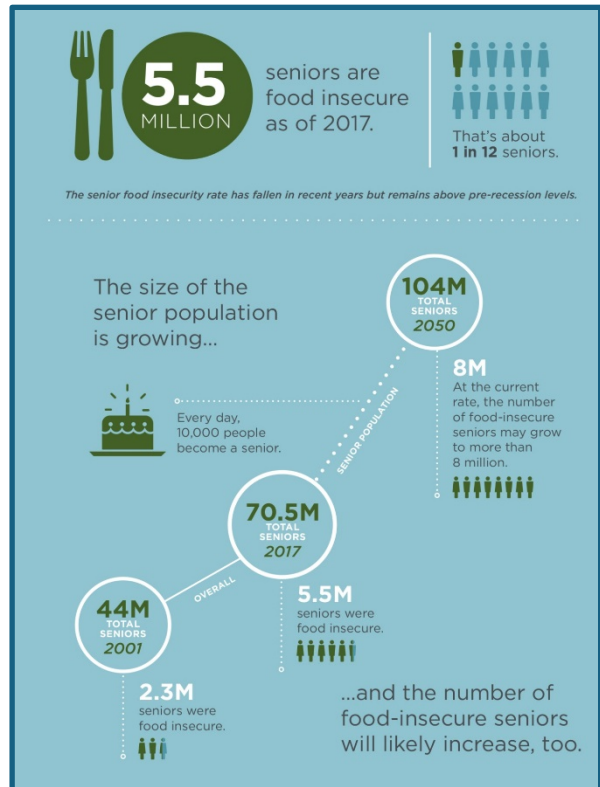
OAA – Older Americans Act

SUA – State Unit on Aging

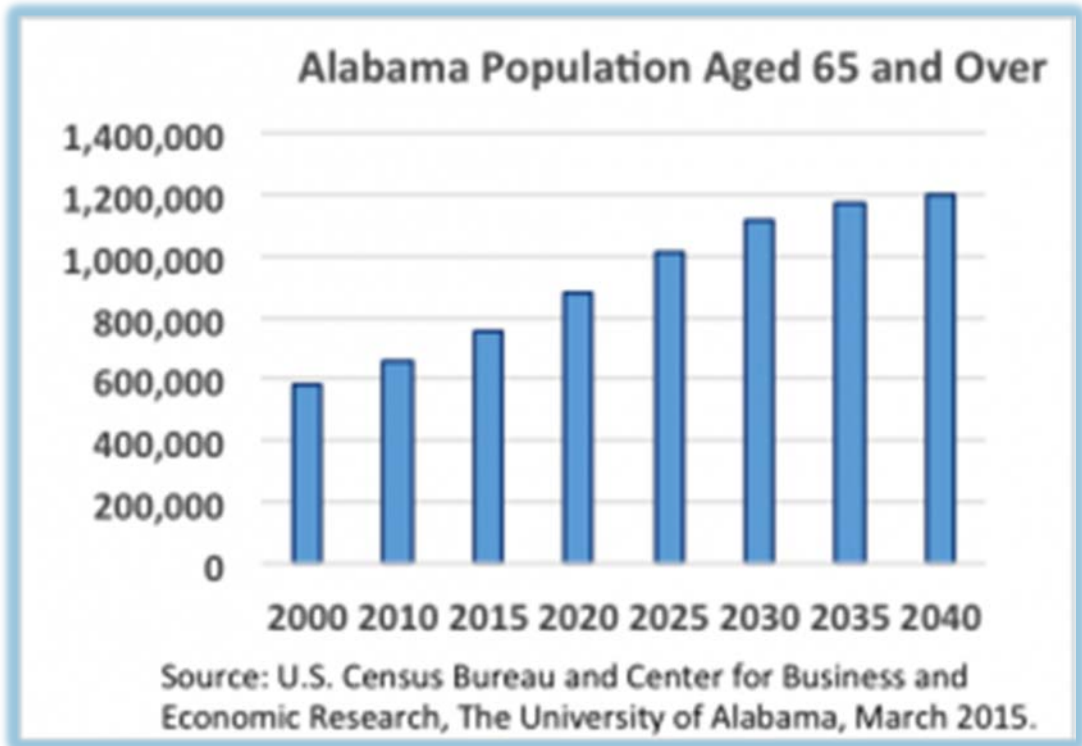
USDA – United States Department of Agriculture

Introduction

According to the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA), more than 5 million seniors in America are food insecure (Coleman, 2022). Older adults who are food insecure often experience negative mental and physical health conditions, such as diabetes, depression, lower cognitive function, hypertension, congestive heart failure, heart attack, osteoporosis, and asthma. Food-insecure older adults are 19% more likely to have high blood pressure, 57% more likely to have congestive heart failure, 65% more likely to be diabetic and 66% more likely to have experienced a heart attack (Gundersen, 2017).



The Elderly Nutrition Program (ENP) administered by the Alabama Department of Senior Services seeks to provide older adults with the nutritional support needed to maintain a healthy and fulfilling life. This program is regarded as one of the most successful community-based programs for seniors in America. In 2023, Alabama’s Elderly Nutrition Program served 4,888,512 meals to 38,536 ENP meal participants. 1,594,994 of these meals were served in congregate settings and 3,293,518 meals were provided by home-delivery or curbside pickup (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2024). The need for such resources is likely to continue to increase as Alabama’s population continues to age. The University of Alabama Center for Business Economic Research projects that the senior citizen population in Alabama will increase 83% by the year 2040 (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2020).



This Solutions Alabama team will highlight the impact of Alabama’s Elderly Nutrition Program and provide research driven recommendations to support the program’s future growth through increased funding, expanded participation, and improved community support.

Background

Older Americans Act

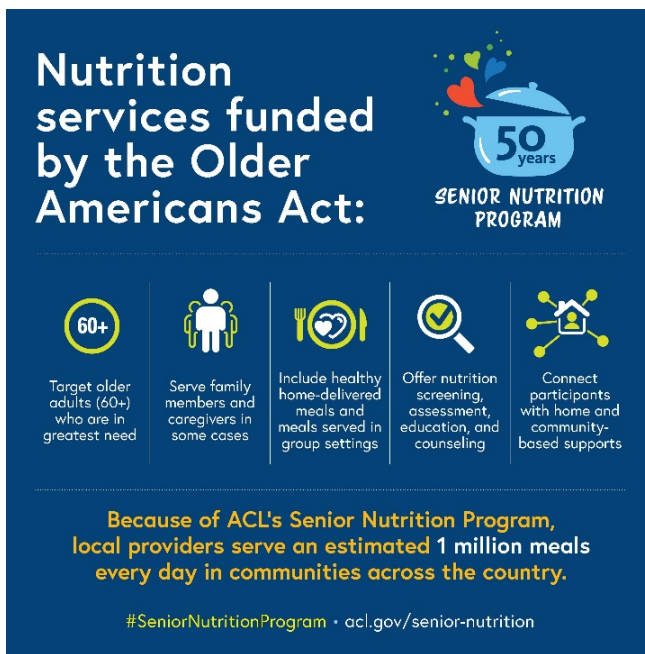
Much of the funding, organization, and regulation of Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program stems from federal legislation. The United States Congress passed the Older Americans Act (OAA) in 1965 in response to the concerns of policymakers about a lack of community social services available for older persons. The original legislation established authority for grants to states for community planning and social services, research and development projects, and personnel training in the field of aging. The law also established the Administration on Aging (AoA) to administer the newly created grant programs and to serve as the federal focal point on matters concerning older persons (Administration for Community Living, 2023).

Although older individuals may receive services under numerous other federal programs, today the OAA is considered a major vehicle for the organization and delivery of social and nutrition services to this group and their caregivers. The OAA authorizes a wide array of service programs through a national network of 56 state agencies on aging, 618 area agencies on aging, nearly 20,000 service providers, 281 Tribal organizations, and 1 Native Hawaiian organization representing 400 Tribes. The OAA also includes community service employment for low-income older Americans; training, research, and demonstration activities in the field of aging; and vulnerable elder rights protection activities (Administration for Community Living, 2023).

The OAA has been reauthorized and amended multiple times since 1965. In more recent versions, the OAA also focuses on collaborative work among several programs and organizations. These include Medicaid, the VA, Medicare, and other federal, state, and local organizations which provide counseling and connect older Americans with various programs that can assist with daily

living issues and nutrition-based programs through Aging and Disability Resource Centers. Total OAA funding for FY2024 is \$2.372 billion, which is \$6.019 million (0.3%) less than the FY2023 level (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Title III of the OAA authorizes grants to state and community organizations to enable them to provide social and nutritional programs for Americans aged 60 and over. Title III accounts for 71.7% of the OAA's total FY2024 funding, \$1.700 billion out of \$2.372 billion (Congressional



Research Service, 2024). Title III-C is the Senior Nutrition Program. Along with providing healthy meals, the program's services promote better health and well-being through socialization with peers, nutrition education activities, and health promotion classes (Administration for Community Living, 2024).

Department of Health and Human Services

There are also multiple federal agencies involved in the funding, organization, and regulation of Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is the largest grant-making agency in the U.S. Most HHS grants are provided directly to states, territories, tribes, and educational and community organizations, then given to people and organizations who are eligible to receive funding (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

2024). The mission of HHS is to “enhance the health and well-being of all Americans, by providing for effective health and human services and by fostering sound, sustained advances in the sciences underlying medicine, public health, and social services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024)”.

Administration for Community Living

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has designated the Administration for Community Living (ACL) to carry out the provisions of the OAA and administer the OAA programs. The Administration for Community Living was established on April 18, 2012. It brought together the Administration on Aging, the Office of Disability, and the Administration on Developmental Disabilities. The ACL was established to promote cooperation between these agencies to allow their programs to better serve the aging and disabled population. One of these programs deals specifically with nutrition support for these communities (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023). Examples of ACLs leadership include the updated definitions, modernizing requirements, and flexibilities with OAA nutrition programs. On February 6, 2024, the ACL released its final rule to update the regulations on implementing OAA programs. It was the first substantial update since 1988 and clarified several requirements. For example, the revised rule allows for continuation of innovations implemented during the pandemic such as providing carry-out meals through the congregate meals program in certain circumstances (Administration for Community Living, 2024). ACL authorizes grants to State Units on Aging (SUAs) and Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) to act as advocates on behalf of older persons and coordinate programs and services for older persons (ACL.gov, Intro to OAA).

Alabama Department of Senior Services

The Alabama Department of Senior Services (ADSS) is a cabinet level state agency, established in 1957 as the Alabama Commission on Aging and later as ADSS under Title 38 Chapter 3 of the Code of Alabama. The agency receives and disburses federal funds that are available to Alabama through the Older Americans Act (OAA). Jean W. Brown was appointed by Governor Kay Ivey to serve as Commissioner in 2019. The agency administers programs for senior citizens, people with disabilities, and their caregivers. The agency has over 50 employees.



The mission of the agency is to promote the independence and dignity of those they serve through a comprehensive and coordinated system of quality services. In addition to the Elderly Nutrition Program, ADSS also administers several other programs and services including:

- Aging & Disability Resource Centers
- Alabama CARES – support services for caregivers
- Alabama Lifespan Respite
- Dementia Friendly Alabama
- Disaster Preparedness
- Elder Justice & Advocacy - elder abuse prevention
- Health Care Fraud
- Alabama SHIP – State Health Insurance Assistance Program
- Legal Assistance
- Medicaid Waiver
- Ombudsman
- Personal Choices
- Hospital to Home Program
- Prescription Drug Assistance
- Senior Community Service Employment Program
- The Alabama State Independent Living Council
- Alabama Senior Citizens Hall of Fame

ADSS carries out the provisions of the Older Americans Act by working closely with the Administration of Community Living and 13 Area Agencies on Aging across the state of Alabama to accomplish their mission (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023).

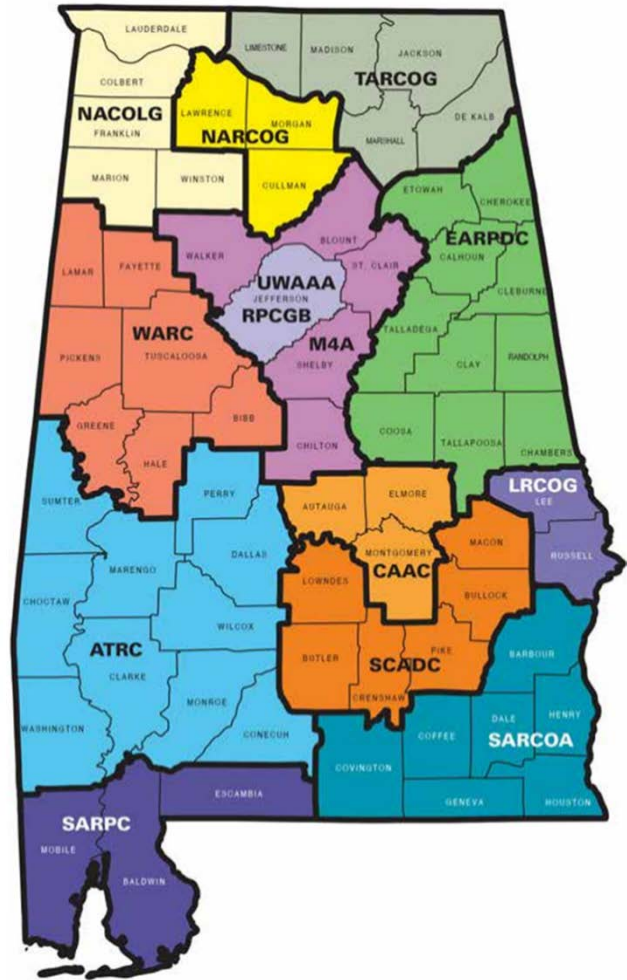
Area Agencies on Aging

Alabama Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) play a crucial role in providing services and support to older adults across the state. An AAA is a public or private non-profit agency, designated by the state to address the needs and concerns of all older persons at the regional and local levels. Each AAA is responsible for a geographic area such as a city, a single county, or a multi-county district (eldercare.acl.gov). These agencies operate with the mission of promoting independence, dignity, and well-being among older adults, as well as providing support for caregivers. They enhance the quality of life for seniors and their caregivers by offering a wide range of services tailored to the needs of older individuals. Each of Alabama’s thirteen Area Agencies on Aging serves as a hub for information and services for older adults (South Alabama Regional Planning Commission Area Agency on Aging). These thirteen agencies form a statewide network that provides a comprehensive and coordinated service delivery system for older adults in Alabama (East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission, 2023).



The 13 Regional Planning Commissions and Area Agencies on Aging covering Alabama are:

- Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments (NACOLG) – serving Colbert, Franklin, Lauderdale, Marion, and Winston counties.
- West Alabama Regional Commission (WARC) – serving Bibb, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Pickens, and Tuscaloosa counties.
- United Way Area Agency on Aging of Jefferson County (UWAAA) – serving Jefferson County.
- Middle Alabama Area Agency on Aging (M4A) – serving Blount, Chilton, Shelby, St. Clair, and Walker counties.
- Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission (ATRC) – serving Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Sumter, Washington, and Wilcox counties.
- South Alabama Regional Planning Commission (SARPC) – serving Baldwin, Escambia, and Mobile counties.
- South Alabama Regional Council on Aging (SARCOA) – serving Barbour, Coffee, Covington, Dale, Geneva, Henry, and Houston counties.
- South Central Alabama Development Commission (SCADC) – serving Bullock, Butler, Crenshaw, Lowndes, Macon, and Pike counties.
- Central Alabama Aging Consortium (CAAC) – serving Autauga, Elmore, and Montgomery counties.
- Lee-Russell Council of Governments (LRCOG) – serving Lee and Russell counties.
- East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission (EARPDC) – serving Calhoun, Chambers, Cherokee, Clay, Cleburne, Coosa, Etowah, Randolph, Talladega, and Tallapoosa counties.
- Top of Alabama Regional Council of Governments (TARCOG) – serving DeKalb, Jackson, Limestone, Madison, and Marshall counties.
- North Central Alabama Regional Council of Governments (NARCOG) – serving Cullman, Lawrence, and Morgan counties.



Each of the AAAs provides comprehensive services through contracts and grants to a wide variety of local agencies, both public and private. (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023).

Some of the key services provided include:

- **Information and Assistance:** AAAs are a primary resource for seniors and caregivers seeking information on services, benefits, and resources. In 2023, approximately 114,000 older adults received services and support through various programs.
- **Nutrition Programs:** These programs include congregate meals and home-delivered meals, ensuring that seniors have access to nutritious food. Alabama AAAs served more than 4.8 million meals to seniors, including both congregate and home-delivered meals in 2023 alone.
- **Caregiver Support:** Alabama AAAs offer support services for caregivers, including respite care, counseling, and education on caregiving techniques. In 2023, nearly 10,000 caregivers received assistance and support services, such as respite care and caregiver training.
- **Health Promotion and Disease Prevention:** AAAs organize health promotion activities, screenings, and educational programs to help seniors maintain their health and prevent chronic diseases. Alabama AAAs conducted several health promotion events, including wellness workshops, health fairs, and seminars, reaching over 24,000 seniors.
- **Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program:** This program advocates for the rights and well-being of residents in long-term care facilities, including nursing homes and assisted living facilities. The program investigated and resolved over 1,200 complaints regarding the quality of care and living conditions in long-term care facilities.
- **Transportation Services:** Many AAAs provide transportation to seniors for essential services, medical appointments, and social activities. Alabama AAAs provided transportation to more than 11,000 seniors.

In addition to these services, each AAA is also responsible for the advocacy, planning and provision of supportive services, and where appropriate, the establishment, maintenance, or construction of multi-purpose senior centers (South Central Alabama Development Commission).

Senior Centers

Senior Centers serve as another integral part of the state’s aging network. Alabama has approximately 330 senior centers across the state, with at least one center in each of the state’s 67



counties. These centers serve as a local point of contact to connect seniors to their communities and to each other. The centers are a trusted place where older adults can access resources to address their health, mobility, social engagement, and nutritional needs. Center administrators and volunteers work diligently to ensure that resources are provided in a fun, social, and inviting environment (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2020).

Some of the services offered include:

- Daily fun activities
- Nutritious meals
- Health and wellness education
- Arts and humanities activities
- Transportation services
- Volunteer opportunities
- Education opportunities
- Leisure travel programs

Many of these services vary by location, depending upon available funding and the needs of senior participants. Some locations are able to offer transportation to the senior centers. Seniors can access this resource by contacting their local center or county aging program. Those who receive

transportation to the senior centers may also use the service for medical appointments or trips to the grocery store. Many centers also offer free computer access, exercise programs, craft projects and occasional day trips. Nutritious meals are offered in a congregate setting to offer seniors the opportunity to socialize with their peers. Alternatively, for seniors who are limited by mobility or other health restrictions, a home-delivered meal program is available (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2024).



Alabama Elderly Nutrition Program

Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program is authorized under Title III-C of the Older Americans Act. It is intended to promote the health and well-being of older adults. The services are designed to reduce hunger, food insecurity, and malnutrition of older individuals. The program assists participants in gaining access to nutritional and health promoting services. The program also seeks to delay the onset of detrimental health conditions that result from sedentary behavior and poor nutritional health (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023).

Congregate Meals

One component of Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program is congregate meals. Congregate meals provide seniors the opportunity to dine in a community setting at their local senior center. Senior centers across the state provide a hot lunch meal program Monday through Friday. Congregate meals comply with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans and provide a minimum of one third of the daily dietary reference intakes. In 2023, 1,594,994 congregate meals were served to Alabama's seniors (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2024).



To receive a congregate meal, the recipient must be deemed to be eligible under Title III of the Older Americans Act. Eligibility criteria include:

- People aged 60 and over
- Spouses of any age of individuals aged 60 and over
- People with disabilities who reside with eligible older individuals
- People with disabilities who live in housing facilities where mainly older individuals live and which also provide congregate nutrition services
- People who provide volunteer services during meal hours

Participant enrollment forms must be completed initially and updated annually. Part of the enrollment form is a Nutritional Risk Assessment which is used to identify client needs. Resources are limited and senior centers cannot provide services to everyone within a community. Instead, the programs must seek to identify older individuals who are in greatest social and economic need. These include individuals who are low income, seniors in rural communities, minorities, those with limited English proficiency, and older individuals who are at risk of institutional care (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023).

In 2023, Alabama partnered with TRIO Community Meals as its new food vendor for the Elderly Nutrition Program. This statewide food service contract produces quality and consistency in meals provided. It also enhances risk management and reduces food costs. TRIO is the largest senior meal provider in the U.S. They operate seven central kitchens and distribution centers across the state. The central kitchens located in Danville, Guntersville, Birmingham, Orrville, Montgomery, Enterprise, and Saraland produce nearly 14,000 hot meals and 16,000 frozen meals each day (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023).

For the health and safety of congregate meal participants, strict guidelines are in place to regulate the foods served in these settings. Only prepared foods obtained from commercial food sources are to be used in congregate meals served at senior centers. Purchased food cannot require additional preparation at the senior center. No home prepared products, produce, or preserved foods may be served at congregate meals. Participants receiving congregate meals are allowed to take home fresh fruit, unopened cartons of fruit juice, milk, wrapped cakes, and cookies (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023).

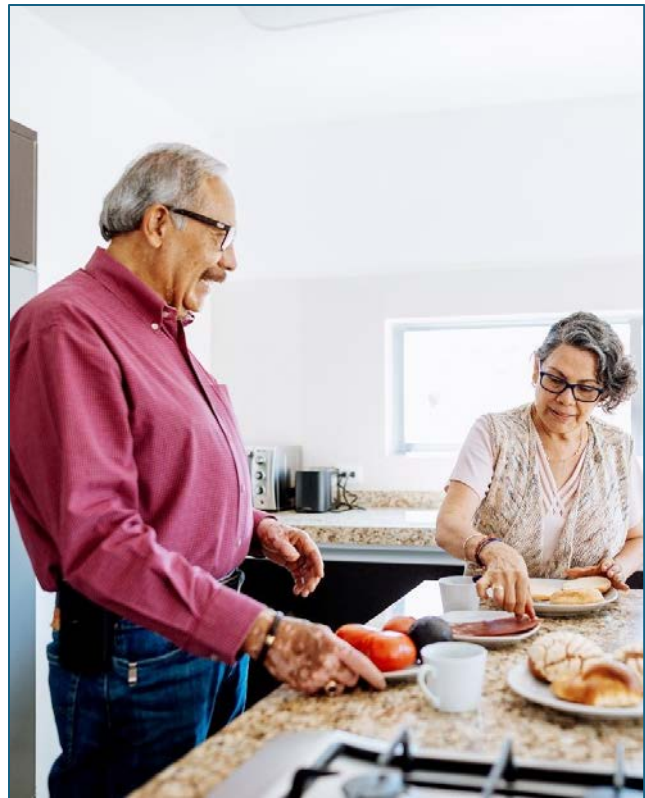


Home-Delivered Meals

Another segment of the Elderly Nutrition Program is home-delivered meals. These meals are available to seniors who are unable to attend congregate meals due to geographical location or whose mobility is limited. Home-delivered meals also comply with the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans and provide a minimum of one third of the daily dietary reference intakes. In 2023, more than 3.2 million meals were home-delivered or provided by curbside pickup at senior centers (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2024).

To receive a home-delivered meal, recipients must be eligible under Title III of the Older Americans Act. Eligibility criteria include:

- People aged 60 and over
- Spouses of any age of individuals aged 60 and over
- People with disabilities who reside with eligible older individuals
- People with disabilities who live in housing facilities where mainly older individuals live and which also provide congregate nutrition services
- Homebound with one Activity of Daily Living (ADL) or one Independent Activity of Daily Living (IADL) required (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023)



For seniors to enroll in the Elderly Nutrition Program and receive home-delivered meals, they must complete a participant enrollment form which is updated annually. A Nutritional Risk Assessment is used to help identify clients who are in greater need of assistance. Resources are limited and there are often waitlists for this service. The home-delivered meals provided by the Elderly Nutrition Program are prepared at TRIO Community Meals central kitchens and can be delivered by local transportation providers, volunteers, and as frozen meals through the state meals vendor (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023).

Daily hot meals are delivered where available or alternatively, a weekly delivery of five frozen meals is also available. Seniors that receive frozen meals must:


- Have operational refrigerators/freezers with space for storage
- Have an operational microwave or oven for reheating
- Be able to manage the tasks of storing and reheating meals (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023)

Nutrition Education

Another feature of the Alabama Elderly Nutrition Program involves education. Nutritional education and counseling are provided to promote healthier habits and better quality of life by delivering “accurate and culturally sensitive” nutritional health information to participants and their caregivers (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023). Nutrition information is provided to participants of the program in consultation with Registered Dietitian

Nutritionists (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023). Participants of the congregate meals receive nutrition educational materials at least monthly. Those that receive home-delivered meals

Green Grapes Grab and Go!




Grapes are Nutrient Rich
Grapes are nutritious and packed with vitamins and minerals. A single ½ cup serving of green grapes contains only 53 calories, have low sodium and are fat and cholesterol free!

Green grapes are packed with potassium and fiber, which can help lower high blood pressure.

Eating Fruit with High Blood Sugar
Grapes are high in naturally occurring sugar. Sugar naturally found in fruit can raise your blood sugar, especially if you have **type 2 diabetes**. That doesn't mean you need to avoid grapes altogether. Even people with type 2 diabetes can eat grapes as part of a healthy diet. The key is to pay attention to your portion sizes and limit yourself to 4-5 servings of fruits per day.

Enjoy Grapes with Meals



Green grapes are a convenient snack, easy to pack into a lunch box or carry with you on outings or picnics.

- Grapes mix well into meat and fruit salads.
- Have grapes with cheese and crackers.
- Add grapes to cold dishes like chicken salad to add texture and sweetness.

½ Cup Serving of Grapes is equal to 16 Grapes

ADSS Nutrition Team, Spring FY23



receive nutrition educational materials at least quarterly (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023). These informational materials can be provided in the form of handouts and brochures covering a range of topics from food preparation techniques to tips for safe food handling. Some of the topics covered by last year’s materials include: “Alzheimer’s and Brain Awareness Month: 4 Brain Power Foods”, “Summer without Salmonella: Proper Food Handling Techniques”, and “Quick Tips for Staying Active with a Disability” (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023).

One-on-one nutrition counseling can also be provided to elderly participants by a Registered Dietitian. Each Area Agency on Aging contracts with a Registered Dietitian to provide nutritional counseling to seniors (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2023). This counseling can consist of an assessment of current health status, development of a written plan for improvement, review of the plan for understanding by the senior or their caregiver and follow up consultations to monitor progress. Topics discussed during consultations may include nutritious foods, weight management



goals, heart health, blood pressure, diabetes, food budgeting, and fitness (United Way Area Agency on Aging of Jefferson County, 2024). The purpose of the nutrition education and counseling is to ensure participants and caregivers are better equipped with the information and resources necessary to manage chronic diseases and other health problems that many of Alabama’s elderly citizens currently face (Administration for Community Living, 2019).

Research Findings

In order to identify ways to support the future growth of Alabama’s Elderly Nutrition Program through increased funding, expanded participation, and improved community support, this Solutions Alabama team examined the practices that are currently being employed by several other states. Additionally, this team contacted management and staff from AAAs across the state to identify best practices and learn from their firsthand experiences.

Funding

The Alabama Department of Senior Services is funded primarily through federal funds. In 2023, the department’s total expenditures were approximately \$219 million. 81% of the expenditures came from federal funds, 18% came from Alabama’s State General Fund, and the remaining 1% were from other sources. Approximately 11% of ADSS total expenditure was spent on Alabama’s Elderly Nutrition Program (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2024).

Due in large part to federal legislation, and in particular the Older Americans Act, many states share a similar funding model and organizational structure of Area Agencies on Aging. States receive federal funding from the ACL through the OAA. Using census data, states receive funds based on criteria such as the number of citizens that are over 60, low income, live in rural areas, are disabled, and other factors. These federal funds are then dispersed amongst AAAs based on an Intrastate Funding Formula (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2023). AAAs can also receive state and local matching funds. This is one area in which states differ. In 2019, AAAs in Georgia received approximately 16% of their total funding from state general funds. This was below the national average of 17%. In Florida, 31% of AAA funding was from state general funds. AAAs in

Alabama received 5% of their total funding from state general funds. The percentage of total funding for AAAs coming directly from the OAA also varies from state to state. The national average is 44%. In both Georgia and Florida, OAA accounted for 51% of total AAA funding. In Mississippi, it was 83%. In Alabama, the OAA accounted for only 29% of AAA funding (USAgings, 2020).

States have also begun to explore alternative funding sources. For example, Georgia has sought to fund elderly nutrition programs in the state through the use of “mini grants.” The Georgia State Plan to Address Senior Hunger was published in 2017 as a part of the state’s Senior Hunger Initiative. This plan references awarding what it calls “entrepreneurial mini grants” to encourage and support “creative initiatives that alleviate the issues of senior hunger, food deserts and isolation” (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2017). These grants not only provide another source of funding for elderly nutrition programs beyond what is available through AAAs, but also provide an incentive for community support and engagement. Management and staff of AAAs across Alabama are also utilizing alternative funding sources. Some AAAs have begun writing grants to secure additional federal funding beyond what is provided by the OAA. Some AAAs have taken a legislative approach, lobbying lawmakers to allocate additional funds at the local, state, and federal levels. Other AAAs in Alabama have taken to hosting charity events such as golf tournaments and community yard sales to raise funds. One AAA, the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission, has contracted with a website manager to streamline the donation process and make monetary contributions possible directly through the website.

Participation

As the population of the United States continues to age, the need for senior support resources is likely to continue to increase. States are dedicated to increasing participation in nutrition programs among seniors. A primary focus of Georgia's Senior Hunger Initiative is to increase the number of seniors that participate in the programs and services that are offered throughout the state. Georgia aims to accomplish this goal by conducting outreach to "organizations, agencies, professionals, and other individuals that serve older adults and individuals with disabilities" such as hospitals, churches, and nursing homes and provide information about what resources are available to seniors. Georgia expects that as information and education is more accessible to the public, this will lead to more seniors being referred to state programs. Georgia intends to have managers of AAAs follow up at least monthly on these referrals in order to ensure that clients' needs are being met. Finally, as part of Georgia's State Plan on Aging for 2024-2027, the state intends to improve the quality and thoroughness of the benefits counseling provided to seniors regarding available services. By ensuring that counselors at Aging and Disability Resource Centers have adequate training and certifications, seniors are more likely to receive complete and accurate information about resources that are available (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2023).

Similarly, Alabama is also seeking to increase the number of seniors that participate in the ADSS Elderly Nutrition Program. One Door Alabama is linked to Alabama's thirteen Aging and Disability Resource Centers (one for each AAA). In 2023, One Door Alabama screened 34,619 people who needed support resources and referred them to available services such as Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2024). Additionally, management and staff of Alabama's AAAs are also striving to expand participation among seniors. Most AAAs agree that what attracts seniors to community centers is food and activities. Many senior

centers publish a newsletter detailing available activities and post a calendar of events and upcoming food menus. Other AAAs utilize social media to share information about available resources and attract new participants. One AAA has hired a public relations consultant to explore ways of adding new clients through social media and community outreach. The most widespread approach to adding new participants and enrolling them in ENP services is word-of-mouth. The programs biggest advocates are the current participants, their friends and family members, and people who have firsthand experience with the many benefits AAAs and the ENP have to offer.

Community Support

Community support is another component vital to the continued success of Alabama's ENP. AAAs across the state have used a variety of methods to build and improve community support. Many of these efforts center around community outreach. They utilize social media to build awareness. They participate in community events to spread the word about needs and services of senior centers. Sharing this information with their communities creates buy in. Some AAAs host senior pageants and local golf tournaments. Professional athletes and other public figures whose family members have benefited from senior services have championed the importance of these programs. One AAA has partnered with a local university to be able to provide computer technology classes at senior centers in their community.

Georgia is another state that has sought to expand its elderly nutrition programs through increased community support. The use of mini grants is a way to engage the public and encourage citizens to take a more active role in Georgia's Senior Hunger Initiative (Middle Georgia Regional Commission, 2023). Beyond this sort of engagement, the Georgia State Plan to Address Senior Hunger also calls for better communication and cooperation with local organizations. By

coordinating efforts with local organizations such as schools, businesses, faith-based organizations, and other civic groups, the state aims to identify gaps in services and become more responsive to the needs of older citizens. “Addressing food insecurity is a community affair. Different types of community organizations may be addressing the same issue while unaware of each other’s programs (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2017).”

Recommendations

Upon reviewing the practices of AAAs across the state and examining the programs being used by other states, this Solutions Alabama team has identified some key ways to support the future growth of Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program. We believe these recommendations will benefit older adults of Alabama by increasing funding, expanding participation, and improving community support for Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program.

Improved Website and Online Presence

More seniors and their caretakers are turning to online resources for information about available services. The total number of times Alabama AAA websites were accessed more than doubled from FY 2022 to FY 2023. Eleven of the thirteen AAAs experienced significant increases in web traffic. These eleven AAAs combined to account for a more than 7% increase in the total number of ENP meals served from FY 2022 to FY 2023. Among all Alabama AAAs, the Southern Alabama Regional Council on Aging saw the largest percentage increase in ENP meals from FY 2022 to FY 2023. This AAA utilizes a website that incorporates online resources for monetary donations, volunteer opportunities and needs assessment forms for new senior participants. In FY 2023, the Southern Alabama Regional Council on Aging provided more ENP meals than any other AAA in Alabama (Alabama Department of Senior Services, 2024). This Solutions Alabama team recommends that every AAA and senior center in Alabama be provided with the support needed to upgrade their websites to facilitate direct monetary contributions through a more streamline process. We also recommend that every AAA and senior center in Alabama be provided with the support needed to upgrade their websites to streamline the process of registering as a volunteer. Additionally,

we recommend that every AAA website be updated to include an online needs assessment form to streamline the registration for seniors. Based upon this team’s research, an improved online presence and website functionality will aid in increasing funding, senior participation, and community support through volunteerism.

Printed Media Campaign

Another tool used by ADSS, AAAs, and senior centers is the circulation of printed materials. Whether in the form of posters, flyers, or brochures, these printed materials are seen as one of the most immediate and direct ways of sharing information. Printed media are commonly shared with participants and circulated throughout the community to spread awareness about available resources. Prior to our work on this project, this Solutions Alabama team was unaware of the extent of Alabama’s ENP. We recommend that ADSS, AAAs, and senior centers expand their usage of printed media to further increase awareness about the existence of, importance of, and needs of the Elderly Nutrition Program.

A recent flyer outreach effort conducted by one AAA received a 10% response rate, resulting in multiple new senior participants registering for the ENP. We also recommend that these printed materials incorporate QR codes as a way of connecting people with relevant information. Posters, pamphlets, and



other printed materials should include a QR code to enable a direct charitable donation to support the ENP. Printed materials should also include a QR code to link users with information about volunteer opportunities. Flyers and brochures should also include a QR code for information regarding registering for the program. This will make sharing the information easier and will streamline the registration process for seniors and their caretakers. Research indicates that by increasing the use of printed media, Alabama's ENP is also likely to benefit from increased funding through charitable donations, and increased community support and participation through increased awareness.

Community Outreach

ADSS, AAAs and senior centers strive to play an active role in their communities. By participating in community events, they add visibility to Alabama's ENP and raise awareness about the benefits of the program. Community events such as fairs, pageants, and festivals are an effective way to reach a large group of seniors and other members of the community. This Solutions Alabama team recommends that AAAs and senior centers seek more opportunities to host or participate in community events to raise awareness of Alabama's ENP. The North Central Alabama Regional Council of Governments consistently seeks new and creative ways to reach seniors in the community. In 2023, a Hawaiian themed luau with food provided by a local sponsor saw more than 600 senior attendees. Attendees then had the opportunity to learn about the AAA programs and available resources. This AAA also hosted a bluegrass concert which saw hundreds more senior attendees gain access to information about AAA resources. Our research shows that increasing visibility and spreading awareness about the needs of older adults and the benefits of Alabama's ENP through community outreach will continue to increase community support and participation among seniors.

Modernization and Rebranding

Some senior centers across the state have begun to explore ways of modernizing and rebranding themselves. A few popular locations have shed the term “senior center” altogether and instead are referred to as “The Club” in Florence, or “Studio 60” in Huntsville. This has helped to remove some of the negative connotations normally associated with senior centers. Clients have a more positive image of their centers, and this attracts new participants and promotes social inclusion. This Solutions Alabama team recommends that senior centers and their staff continue to seek new and creative ways to modernize and rebrand themselves. Events and activities have also helped to attract participants. Attracting participants to these community centers is also important in the wake of Covid-19. The number of congregate meals served has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. One senior center director indicated attendance increases by more than 25% when certain activities are offered. Some of the more popular activities include those focused on exercise, travel, arts and games. By offering a wide range of activities, centers attract more participants, provide them with a positive experience, and make them feel welcome in their communities. Based upon this team’s research, modernizing and rebranding many of the state’s senior centers will likely increase participation in the Elderly Nutrition Program, particularly congregate meal services.

Coordinated Resources

In 2015, what started as the No Wrong Door federal initiative, has since transformed Alabama’s thirteen Aging and Disability Resource Centers into One Door Alabama. One Door Alabama serves as a single access point for information regarding resources available to older adults, connecting seniors with services provided by local organizations, federal programs, ADSS and other

state agencies. This Solutions Alabama team recommends the continued expansion and development of One Door Alabama through additional training, outreach, and partnerships with community-based organizations. One Door Alabama has increased the number of people screened for assistance every year since its inception. As Alabama's senior population continues to grow, so too will the need for additional screening. Two of the top referral categories for One Door Alabama are for food assistance and the home-bound meals program. By coordinating efforts across organizations, whether those are governmental or community-based, Alabama will be able to identify gaps in services and become more effective in providing nutritional support for our seniors. This team's research suggests that through improved coordination of available resources and expanding One Door Alabama, the state will be able to identify more seniors who need assistance and increase participation in the Alabama's Elderly Nutrition Program.

Conclusion

In support of the 2024 reauthorization of the Older Americans Act, U.S. Senator Bob Casey, chairman of the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, and senior member of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee, recently said, “Our Nation’s older adults have fought in our wars, raised our families, and built our communities – they deserve our support as they age,” (U.S. Senate, 2024). In 2023, Alabama’s Elderly Nutrition program provided 4,888,512 meals to more than 38,000 individuals. The research shows that the need for nutritional support programs is likely to significantly increase over the coming decades. The Alabama Department of Senior Services is committed to providing the support and resources needed to promote the health, independence, and dignity of older adults. This Solutions Alabama team believes that the recommendations outlined within this paper will lead to increased funding, expanded participation, improved community support, and will support the future growth of Alabama’s Elderly Nutrition Program for years to come.

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